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# NERVOUS NEW ENGLAND

FREDERICK E. PIERCE

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WHEN a chronically absent-minded young lady walks to the marriage altar carrying a cake of ivory soap instead of a prayer-book; when a morbid rural lover sulks cantankerously among his furrows instead of "having it out" with his sweetheart; and when the traits of such young people become symptomatic of their race—is the situation one for amusement or for scientific alarm? A past decade answered "amusement"; our own answers "alarm." Only yesterday, it seems to us, literature was reflecting rural New England as full of genial and humorous oddities, fit subjects for the amused and amusing pen of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Since 1910 there has been a change. Robert Frost, Edith Wharton, Amy Lowell, and many lesser writers, have consecrated farmhouse and hillside to the spirit, not of comedy, but of tragedy. Side by side with this picture in verse and fiction has developed one equally grim in the charts of the psychologist and economist.

We would like to believe this panorama of want and morbidity exaggerated. Certainly New England is a region representing great extremes in wealth and poverty, in society and isolation, in old stock and new blood; in vigorous health and morbid decay. Few among its people live in the tragic poverty of Miss Wharton's Ethan Frome. The neurotic horrors of Amy Lowell's *Overgrown Pasture* represent something that is terribly true in individual cases, grossly misleading as a typical picture. Moreover, our whole continent has been growing nervous. Everywhere we have had a steady increase in all forces making for neuroticism, from adulterated liquors to compulsory education. Yet we cannot lay the flattering unction to our souls that local conditions are normal. For one face to face with the alarming amount of nervous derangement in rural New England, there are few objects entitled to deeper

and sadder interest than this degenerating region, once the cradle alike of a nation's political freedom and of its intellectual life.

What causes underlie this decadence? May one who is neither a scientist nor a wide traveler suggest an answer? He was himself once a struggling, brooding young farmer; he is now a trained university scholar; and perhaps the double vision resulting from those two points of view may see something which either eye alone would miss.

In many cases, unquestionably, these neurotic conditions are the aftermath of the old Puritan theocracy, the racial reaction to that long, abnormal strain. I remember as a boy pondering in a nightmare of horror on whether I had or had not committed the unpardonable sin. Yet I was a husky young fellow who never shrank from my ten hours at the plow-tail, and had been brought up under a liberal modern theology. The thing which convulsed me with fear was not a religious conviction but a nervous reaction from dead ancestors. I have seen it working in scores of people. At first it was a religious dogma in those grim old days when clergymen would lean toward a young lady across their pulpit and strive with the hands of prayer to snatch her from the waiting subterranean flame. Then from a religious dogma it faded into an ethical prompting, that terrible New England sense of the "ought" which, according to circumstances, might seem either noble or abnormal. Now in these later days, from an ethical prompting it has declined to an unreasoning neurotic instinct, prodding its poor victims with incessant pins in unending flight from they know not what. Racked and exhausted in the treadmill of their own subjective abnormalities, one after another the sufferers have collapsed.

But the loss of new manhood has been even more destructive than the retention of old melancholies. How great has been the exodus of youth from our rural districts any economist can tell. The daughters have left by thousands and the sons by tens of thousands. Like the stricken Persia of ancient Aeschylus,

The land is wailing for its young men.

That exodus has created among our hill farms an economic sieve through which the fit have sifted away, and in which the automatically-sorted unfit have remained. With

imperfect schooling and inadequate markets, face to face with the stark problem of existence among unresponsive gravel fînolls, the strong only were the ones who could break away, and they under such pressure went to a man. We New Englanders have boasted so proudly and so truly that our barren hillsides furnished the brains of a nation. Why did we forget the inevitable corollary that these little hill towns could not furnish the intellectual leaders for a people and still have genius at home? One no longer sees among our fields and barnyards the best type of old time farmer boy, with the hayseed in his hair and the vision in his eyes, over-alls and ambition, dung-fork and daring. In his place the automatically assorted weaklings of his race have produced a degenerating stock.

It was not merely inferiority *by nature*, however, in those who remained, not merely inherent defects, which produced existing conditions. The long continued exodus set in motion forces that tended to crush down even the strong man when circumstances held him at home. Chief of these was the growing loneliness. Solitude may be bearable in a new country that has always been solitary, where people have come by their own choice, where they see the future peeping over the horizon. But solitude in regions that have once been populous, where memory at every turn creates vacancies which it fails to fill, where abandoned farms look down on crowded graveyards—that is another thing. Solitary widows and widowers in deserted homes from which noisy families had scattered, young girls withering away in retired hamlets stripped of prospective lovers, little groups of gaunt old women in churches that once had buzzed with laughter and sweethearting—these created an environment in which thought gave way to brooding and enterprise to stagnation. That loneliness was increased by what seemed an economic blessing, the great and rapid improvement in labor-saving machinery for agriculture. This may have relieved the strain on muscles, but it increased the tension on brain and nerve, for it made fewer laborers necessary in a farming district and the loneliness so much the more crushing. Seventy years ago my grandfather would have half a dozen men in haying time besides himself and his sons, none too many when his acres must be covered by the old-fashioned scythe. Hard work, no doubt, but gregarious work with social rewards; jokes and

stories, laughter and racing, tribal assemblies round the cider jug under some cool maple, where theology, politics, and indecent stories were as rife as at a corner grocery. Today all that is needed to cut those meadows is one man with a modern mowing-machine; and he drives there through the long forenoons—alone. Instead of human voices and interchange of thoughts he hears only the creaking of his whiffle-tree, the clicking of his knife-bar, and an Ossianic wind blowing through neighboring shade trees. Where four or five young men and women used to bring the milk home, laughing and coquetting, now one dreary-eyed, lonely old man handles his thirty cows with an up-to-date milking machine, no human being in sight, no voices but those of cattle. Not only have the children of the farmer left him; the old-time unique and picturesque groups of farmhands have gone as well, a veriform appendix amputated by new industrial conditions. The little tenant-houses in which they used to live are tumbling to decay. The number of lights that shine out at evening by solitary hill and valley decreases as steadily as the number of people who gather around each lonely lamp. It is easy to see how such an environment produces hopelessness, discouragement, lack of purpose in life. Still more ominous is the tendency of these isolated lives toward oddity and morbid brooding, toward those mental ruts that gradually engulf even intellects of natural power, toward that terrible *ingrowing mind* which turns more and more in on itself and cuts deeper and deeper into the sore it makes.

Another cause of neurotic decadence is probably to be found in sanitary conditions. The hereditary heir of her rustic culture was as much inferior to German-trained engineers in sanitation as he was superior to German-trained philologists in literary appreciation. Ill-balanced diets that overloaded the stomach and undernourished the body, badly chosen sites for houses and still worse ones for barnyards with their dangerous drainage, too much fresh air in the woods by day and too little in one's chamber at night, a traditional distrust of doctors which usually called them in in time for the epitaph rather than the diagnosis, ill-regulated excesses in tea, coffee, pork, and patent medicines—all these militated against that rosy-cheeked serenity which farmers were supposed to have and had not.

Factors mentioned so far have been working for many

years. Yet it is only in the last decade that conditions seem to have grown bad enough to force themselves generally on the eyes of author and scientist. That fact would seem to imply some additional cause, which began its work more recently and precipitated the results of all the others. Such a cause can be readily found in the financial crisis of the Cleveland and Harrison administration. The last decade of the nineteenth century was a despondent, dreary, drudging period for the New England farmer. According to economists, his profits in 1897 reached the lowest level that they had touched in half a century. I distinctly remember—for it was my peculiar privilege to be an inexperienced boy farmer at that time—I distinctly remember selling potatoes at twenty-five cents a bushel and milk at one and three-fourths cents a quart.

Conditions in our rural districts during those closing years of the nineteenth century became positively grim. If the exodus of the young had been serious before, it grew doubly so then, when poverty, celibacy, and stagnation were the only heritage at home. And on those who remained, held fast by age, by poverty, by sickness, by incompetence, or by dependent relatives, on those least fitted in the struggle for existence, fell its intolerable burden in the hour of an economic crisis. It fell on minds rendered restless and gloomy by Puritan theology, devitalized by an antiquated hygiene, dulled and crushed by a lonely isolation that increased around them daily. The scarcity of vigorous young men and the difficulty of getting even the barest living threw on the shoulders of the sickly and middle-aged a crushing load of overwork and incessant worry, ideally conducive toward nervous break-downs. Is it any wonder that within a dozen years after 1897 the literary pictures of New England grew both numerous and tragic, that the pathologist and the social worker began ominously to shake their heads over her? Once the breeding-ground of authors, she has now become their feeding-ground, a source of plentiful copy for them to graze on. When that literary vogue is over—whether the future belongs to the immigrant or the beef trust—the curtain must fall forever on a social life that was once the brain center of a continent. Its peculiar virtues, vices, and misfortunes alike have eaten into its being like deadly acids.

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